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Saigon due to remodel arrest plan

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Saigon

The Saigon government is taking steps that could help eliminate one of the most glaring abuses of its controversial Phoenix program, which is aimed against the Viet Cong political and administrative apparatus.

One of the most persistent criticisms of this United States-backed program, which is supposed to coordinate intelligence from several different agencies, is that police and military operations launched under the Phoenix concept result in the arrest and imprisonment of many innocent civilians.

Among these are civilians who have been forced to assist the Viet Cong by paying taxes, or doing jobs such as digging trenches or carrying rice. They are not full-fledged Viet Cong political and administrative cadre. The government calls them "Class C Communist offenders."

Class C civilians

It is the Class A and B Viet Cong, the hard-core, full-time cadre, who are supposed to be the main targets of Phoenix operations. It is they who run the Viet Cong "shadow government" and support Viet Cong military units through recruiting, indoctrinating, propagandizing, collecting taxes, planning assassinations and kidnappings, and organizing supplies.

But government sources say provincial security committees throughout South Vietnam sentence to prison tens of thousands each year some 10,000 "Class C civilians." They outnumber all the "A" and "B" category prisoners combined. Thousands of these prisoners are never brought to court trial, and thousands of others have never even been sentenced.

Individual case histories indicate that many who have gone to prison as active supporters of neither the government nor the Viet Cong come out as active backers of the Viet Cong and with an implacable hatred for the government. This is partly because of the treatment they have received and partly because of the Viet Cong indoctrination efforts inside the prisons are very effective.

The government apparently decided all the arrests were doing more harm than good, and the Ministry of Interior recently called a meeting of the agencies and ministries concerned with security to discuss plans aimed at reducing the arrests of Class C civilians.

Actually, there are already regulations on the books that are supposed to provide for lenient treatment of such civilians, particularly when they were forced to do something for the Viet Cong against their will. But the regulations have not been working.

The government plans to launch a nationwide publicity campaign and training courses for government cadre, aimed at reducing the arrests and getting the cooperation of those now assisting the Viet Cong.

Difficulties seen

But the government may run into difficulties at the implementation stage. Earlier government efforts to get local authorities to reduce the number of Class C arrests have failed. The new plans do, however, have top-level backing from Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem and presumably also from President Thieu. Officials appear to be more sensitive than before to the problems involved.

Interior Ministry officials, for instance, say the money being spent to detain and feed thousands of "C" category civilians could be better used for economic, educational, and social-reform programs and that a reduction in the arrests of such civilians would go a long way toward improving crowded conditions in many prisons where the majority of the prisoners are Class C.

Another consideration

There is another consideration: Not only are the prisons crowded, but prison authorities also are running into increasing disciplinary problems with the prisoners.

Ever since international attention focused on the conditions in the maximum-security cells, or so-called tiger cages, on Con Son Island last July, growing numbers of prisoners throughout the country have been striking and protesting. At Con Son the problem has grown particularly acute.

The government action regarding arrests came when the Phoenix effort against the Viet Cong underground is coming under increasing scrutiny as one aspect of the government's pacification program, which is not getting the desired results.

Few officials in Saigon are prepared to go